Chapter 3

Michael Jackson and Racial Identification

Michael Jackson seemingly moves from being a cute black boy to being neither male nor black in his adulthood—that is, according to some critics. Certainly, we use identity to construct our lives. Identity provides a nexus for membership into groups based on, for example, race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, disability, and religious affiliations. Yet, these identities are always already questionable. Even though people are constructing identities all the time (gay and punk, for example), for Michael Jackson, having a black American identity is important. How this "having" becomes a part of "being" black is an essential question. In an interview with Oprah Winfrey on February 10, 1993, Michael Jackson made a public announcement: "I'm a black American. . . . I'm proud to be a black American. I'm proud of my race." Leaving aside, for the time being, Michael Jackson's announcement, the emphasis on being black American, which reads the doubling of subjectivity, black and American, "two souls . . . in one dark body," stands in for what W. E. B. Du Bois calls the "double consciousness,"[1] which can be extended to Frantz Fanon's idea of "implicit knowledge," of living one's life in two ways: one on the surface (outside) and the other hidden (inside) even from one's self.

It is clear that Michael Jackson's pride of being black is at "the center of his deconstruction"[2] of race, as is expressed in his songs, videos, and dance performances. As the youngest member of the Jackson Five, he "marked the assertive mood of 'Black Pride' cultural movements," with performances such as "I Want You Back" and "ABC."[3] Certainly, his song "Black or White," for example, is not about him confirming his racial identity, but about refusing the constraints of racial identification. "I am

tired of this stuff. . . . I am not going to spend my life being a color," he wearily acknowledges, in an effort to dismiss racial norms and reconstruct a racial identity, seemingly *not black*, *not white*. This would be all well and good, but in the United States, race is inescapably identifiable. We all remember the one-drop rule (of blood), which deemed black anyone "having any African blood in their veins" no matter how white they looked. Nowadays, individuals are identifying themselves as mixed race and, as such, do not identify as "truly black."[4] Given that mixed-race individuals do not consider themselves "truly black," should they be spared the stigmatization of blackness?[5] It is hard to say. One thing for sure is that it is very hard to bypass America's history of the one-drop rule. In this respect, Michael Jackson's body, seemingly *not black*, *not white*, still carries the marks of America's history of race on his body, his skin, his surface, and, as a subterranean "force"[6] in the form of the unstoppable disciplinary power of whiteness, reducing the black body to abnormality.

Michael Jackson does not have a problem with the representation of race, but with how race is presented—that is, the immediate prereflective and prelinguistic existence of what is constructed as blackness, which is what race is. Race is on the surface of the body and a means of social control. Indeed, race functions as a disciplinary regime, and racialized subjects are fashioned through racial discipline. In other words, the means through which this disciplinary formation is introduced and continuous is through a specific form of power that produces the racialized subjects. All blacks can be said to fulfill "a kind of performative racial passing";[7] that is, the means through which racial discipline is "regulated and sustained."[8] While discipline and the performative essentials of race might seem to delimit ways of being "raced," as is seemingly the case for Michael Jackson, it is imperative to see how the artist attempts to elicit new modes of racial "becoming," *not black*, *not white*, which thereby cast him off as "weird" or a "freak."

What is striking is that Michael Jackson merely asks society not to "black[en] or white[n] [him]." These words read as Michael Jackson's intimation to move beyond race because race is, as he claims, "where your blood comes from."[9] However, blacks belonging to a group whose blood is "bad" has figured so prominently in the history of race relations in the United States. And while it is true that the first time we see our blood, it always shocks and horrifies us, the "one-drop rule" (of blood) carries the American history of racism. On the opposite side of this racial spectrum, whiteness is defined as wholesome and pure, which is what black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde calls "mythical norms."[10] In order to maintain the

racial hierarchy, the concept of whites as pure serves to make the distinction between whites and blacks, which, of course, has racist implications. It means that Michael Jackson is "a slave" not to racial normalcy and cultural inscriptions, but to his own sense of his racial identity as "different, non-identical, and non-identitary."[11] In a word, Michael Jackson tries to move away from the assigned normalized category of race, and in his self-fashioning, he seems to be *not black*, *not white*. In the end, Michael Jackson's self-fashioning, nonetheless, works in the production and presentation of him as a racialized subject.

It is precisely for this reason that the following question imposes itself: If Michael Jackson is *not black* and *not white*, what is he? Because he is positioned between the " 'other' of 'being' " (not white), he is already "another" because blackness is already "*not*" being, or being "*not*." In a sense, Michael Jackson aspires not to be "*not*."[12] Not to be "*not*" positions him in a racial in-betweenness. This ambivalent self-identification or, in this case, disidentification of the subject from himself is the consequence of a normalizing whiteness that discursively differentiates between black and white racial belonging. To be black is to be outside of whiteness, another way of saying to be "outdoors." As Sara Jane Cervenak and J. Cameron Carter, taking about Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eyes*, put it, being black is "an irrevocable and physical fact, defining and complementing our metaphysical condition."[13] In a word, blackness remains outdoors/outside; that is, exposed, "overdetermined from the outside," even when brought indoors/inside.[14]

Remember the case of the actor and playwright Ossie Davis; when he was six or seven years old, two white police officers ordered him to get into their car. They drove him to the precinct where they kept him there for an hour, laughing at him and eventually pouring cane syrup over his head, which provoked more laughter because he "looked like a silly black boy."[15] Eventually, he was given some peanut brittle and was sent home.[16] This is a perfect example of blackness when brought indoors is always outdoors. There is no end to blackness outdoorness. Take the case of Michael Jackson's Neverland Ranch: it a space of domesticity and Michael Jackson's fortress. But the doors of this fortress were forced open by the police and the place ransacked. Even if the police obtained a warrant to search the premises, they violated both the place and body of Michael Jackson (as I said before, they took pictures of his genitals) as evidenced in Michael Jackson's alleged child molestation charges. Blackness makes the difference of being indoors and to be surveilled; that is, to be outdoors. To be black is to be without cover. As soon as blackness enters

the indoors, the Kantian practical reasons go through the window, and blackness remains outside, outdoors.

Is Michael Jackson an other "other"? An other "other" is a person, in the words of Diana Fuss, "who do[es] not quite fit into the rigid boundary definitions of (dis)similitude, or who indeed may be left out of the Self/Other binary altogether."[17] Because of Michael Jackson's ostentatious otherness made possible through hair straightening and plastic surgery, which, some scholars have argued, have diminished Michael Jackson's "African features,"[18] I want to suggest that he is an other "other": *not black* (other), *not white* (other). This is one way of looking at Michael Jackson's artifactual identity and discussing how the new model of a racial identity that he seeks to construct produces an otherness of the "other." Of course, this makes sense since the otherness of the "other" can only be contemplated because blackness is already "other" and Michael Jackson cannot escape blackness as cultural inscription. The "twoness" that W. E. B. Du Bois talks about is, in Michael Jackson's case (an other "other"), like "two souls in one dark body."[19]

When it comes to the nonnormative construction of Michael Jackson's raced identity, it is useful to draw a parallel between race performativity and "gender/queer performativity" as theorized by Judith Butler in *Gender Troubles* and *Bodies That Matter*. To say, then, that race is performative is to say that it is a certain kind of presentation, which becomes reified and realized through repetitive performative and daily acts.[20] The question that remains is that given the ontology and epistemology of race in the United States and its modalities of visual performance—that is, not what race is but what race does—is it possible to neutralize/deconstruct the performative function of race that "inferiorizes" blacks? Whether race performativity can have any, in the words of Seth Silberman, "assumable relationship to [that] person's life or consciousness"[21] is important. Indeed, race performativity is materialized out of its repeated performance and produces the results of that which is seen and named, which, in this case, is blackness. Blackness is made to be, in practice, the marker for a black identity, operating as a "becoming," which always assumes the status of nonbeing. In this regard, "performativity," as Judith Butler explains, "must be understood not as a single or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names."[22] The representation of blackness as racial discipline produces race as a bodily mark. In so doing, it sets multiple systems of power relations that regulate and sanction the black body.[23] In this regard, power

must be understood as creating the subject as well as presenting the very condition on its existence.[24]

My attention to the racial self-fashioning of Michael Jackson provides for another account of how race is not lost; it is never lost; and it is always at the forefront of identity formation as a bodily mark that prescribes ways of "seeing" and "knowing" all there is to know about blacks. And while Michael Jackson is positioned on the margin of normalcy, as we know from deconstruction, that which is relegated to the margin is often at the center of thinking itself. That is to say, in the case of race, race gives significance to the ways in which blacks, through laws, epistemology, and cultural practice, are positioned as the "other" in the United States. For sure, Michael Jackson's racial identity has prompted tremendous debates about the ways he has destroyed his African physiognomy and unfixed "race on the body."[25] In this sense, race is viewed as essentialist; that is, "a belief in the real, true essence"[26] of blackness, "the invariable and fixed properties, which define the 'whatness' "[27] of blackness as opposed to the "whoness" of blackness—that is, who blacks are. As I have mentioned before, the "whoness" of blacks are not yet known to the white world, and when it is known it will be reflected in blacks' actions in the world. When this happens, "I can say I'm the light of the world," to borrow from Michael Jackson's song "This Is It." Even so, the "whatness" always takes precedence over the "whoness" of blackness.[28] In the words of Michael Jackson: "This is real."[29]

Fred Astaire, observing Michael Jackson's dance moves in "Billie Jean," describes him as "a hell of a mover" and "an angry dancer. I'm the same way. I used to do the same thing with my cane."[30] Astaire's comments are meant in the spirit of congeniality. Certainly, Michael Jackson's dance "is a series of 'rhythmically patterned movement performed by a sentient being,' " which "is a succinct depiction of a complex process of embodied creative expressions that have many levels and purposes."[31] However, Margo Jefferson, in her bleak outlook, views Michael Jackson's dance as "a young man who can't control his energies."[32] Others see his moves as "the angry black man" who is "working something out."[33] Why shouldn't black men, or even anyone, be angry when racism in all of its multidimensional forms is more resilient than ever? It is my fervent hope that this anger will propel all of "us" to go against racism. But "us" does not signal that the "us" is all the "same" in the fight against racism and to heal the world from this "usual disease," in Harper Lee's apt phrase in *To Kill a Mocking Bird*,[34] so as to secure a better future for all of us.

Notwithstanding that these overstatements of Michael Jackson's dance moves and superfluous vocalizations, as it is, show that blackness is always already policed by the white gaze, making blacks into "the problem"[35] and barring them from being on their own terms. Again, this is how Fanon explains it: "It's cold, the [Negro] is shivering, the [Negro] is shivering because he is cold, the little boy is trembling because he is afraid of the [Negro], the [Negro] is shivering with cold, that cold that goes through your bones, the handsome little boy is trembling because he thinks that the [Negro] is quivering with rage, the little white boy throws himself into his mother's arms: Mama, the [Negro] is going to eat me up."[36] Blacks, as a result, are forever exposed to all kinds of epistemic, ontological, and targeted "violence," understood "as a violation of one's being"[37] that should not be violated but is violated. What sets in motion the violence directed at blacks is the visuality of race; that is, its outside/outdoor appearance, its surfaceness in relation to the body, and its physiological features as a social phenomenon. At the same time, it is this violence that sustains blackness, and without it, whiteness would lose its preeminence.[38]

Frantz Fanon's analysis in *The Wretched of the Earth* and Michel Foucault's in *Discipline and Punish* help us to recognize how the body, the state, and violence are linked with America's history of institutionalized violence, which counted on "men to kill some white people to keep them white and to kill many blacks to keep them black."[39] A black person who entertains the very possibility of crossing over racial boundaries must be policed at whatever cost. And since whiteness is the norm, it makes sense that specific epistemologies, ideologies, and practices are in place to systematically sanction and protect white privilege. Michael Jackson and his quandary of identity, besides demonstrating the problematics of self-identification for blacks in the United States, provides a useful starting point to analyze the preeminence of whiteness and the specific ways blacks experience their being through normalized whiteness.

Given this, racial identification, in Fanon's words, "becomes a pathological condition"[40] in which blacks' subjectivity becomes subjugated by a gaze that is directed through the episteme of whiteness. For the most part, this condition can be transformed into a melancholia and a perversion, which inadvertently takes on an unusual form of racial identification. This experience of subjugation leads to an identity "crisis" and a misidentification, as is the case of Michael Jackson, where the "self's other" (not white) and the "other" (black) have become implicated. And while blacks become strangers to themselves—that is, "not to be an Other to oneself, but to be

without any stable reference point in the world, to be separate ultimately through one's radical immanence to oneself from the world,"[41]—the subject, hence, becomes an unsettled agent, in between sameness (whiteness) and otherness (blackness). This, for blacks, is experienced first as corporeal, the material foundation of one's social and subjective conditions.[42] Secondly, one's image starts and ends viciously disjointed. In this disjointedness, according to African American philosopher George Yancy, "one ceases to experience one's identity from a locus of self-definition and begins to experience one's identity from a locus of externally imposed meaning."[43] In other words, one is "forever in combat with [one's] own image"[44] as the essential "other" of whiteness.

Michael Jackson's preoccupation with racial in-betweenness, *not black*, *not white*, an otherness within the "other," a body that is overdetermined, unrepresentative, and escapes strict description, in no uncertain terms, signals blackness. Indeed, Michael Jackson's self-fashioning has promoted anxiety among the masses. As we know from Judith Butler, some modes of appearance for category, such as race, "are marked and some are unmarked."[45] That is, in Butler's words, "some stand out, such as blackness, as visible social signs, whereas whiteness, which is no less social is nevertheless part of the taken-for-granted visual field, a sign of its presumptive hegemony."[46] While for Michael Jackson racial identification expresses itself in the form of the multiplying of identity, operating as a narcissistic manifestation of the "self's other" (not white) and the "other" (not black), which represents a form of racial liminality, his racial identification is related to the other cultural representation of alterity that implicates him as wanting to be "white," which goes against strict strictures about representing the "truth" of the visibility of race as a form of difference discursively marked on the body.

To say nothing of Michael Jackson's desire not to anchor himself in racial particularity, he cannot avoid being trapped in the doubling of otherness, which is not dominated by a longing to undo blackness and move toward whiteness but by a longing for racial ambiguity. Michael Jackson's performance and resistance to impose racial definitions is not locked in a symbiotic relationship of subordination (blackness) and domination (whiteness), but it seems to display an otherness of the "other" or an other "other." Michael Jackson's seemingly racial in-betweenness, *not black*, *not white* still signals blackness, and he continues to be seen through what Fanon calls the "corporeal malediction" of his unavoidable blackness.[47] Hence, like every black person in America, Michael Jackson

must live the color line, the racial divide, which bears witness to the existential dilemma at the very core of his sense of "self."

In this chapter, I will examine how Michael Jackson is positioned between the "self's other" and the "other." Indeed, because of Michael Jackson's manufactured otherness through self-fashioning, which includes alterations of hair straightening and plastic surgery, I want to suggest that he is an other "other." In other words, even though Michael Jackson works on constructing another identity, the polymorphous uncertainties of his self-identification process, all operating in complex and different directions, are often simplified as him wanting to be "white." Part of my intention is to demonstrate that Michael Jackson's appearance deconstructs and challenges the corporeal notions of "natural bodies" and fixed identities. However, his race identity is not lost; it is never lost.

Jackson and Self-Fashioning

Let's take at our starting point that blackness is a social and subjective identity and the locus of identification.[48] At once, it is viewed as a sign of deficiency, disapproval, and lack. Michael Jackson is determined to break away from the wretched construction of blackness so he reconstructs another image, *not black*, *not white*, bordering on racial in-betweenness, an otherness within the "other," which undoubtedly indicates blackness. As I mentioned above, the King of Pop continues to be seen through what Fanon describes as the "corporeal malediction" of his inescapable blackness, which, as a category of analysis, is a way of showing that although Michael Jackson's identity is seemingly not stable—it is in flux—it disturbs and unsettles because it does not conform to its bodily marking and positioning in the realm of the either/or race category (black/white),[49] which deems him as not quite human.

However, this form of reading Michael Jackson continues through journalistic references of, and commentary upon, Michael Jackson as lacking humanness, to use the words of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guatteri, a "body without organs."[50] It is for good reasons Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey, in *Thinking Though the Skin*, wonder "[h]ow bodies come to be identified as having organs in the first place."[51] Indeed, even if blacks want "to be" (being)—and "not to be" (nonbeing) is never a universalistic concept—they are positioned in such a way, "not to be" (nonbeing), that they are constantly dehumanized. In fact, if blacks were to be seen as human,

they could go beyond the boundary of race, and like whites, they could be viewed as raceless. However, blacks are not, in Toni Morrison's words, "worthy to be treated as whites."[52]

The actress Elizabeth Taylor once compared Michael Jackson to E.T. because of "their mutual alien-ness, their distance from the planet earth, their ambiguous sex."[53] Michael Jackson's various parts on-screen as a nonhuman "other" include those of a scarecrow in the 1978 *The Wiz*,[54] a werewolf and a dancing zombie in his *Thriller* video, and a Robocop-like metallic figure in *Smooth Criminal*. Michael Jackson also appears as a thirty-foot-tall statue in his 1995 promotional video for his song "HIStory,"[55] which allows many to confirm that he is not quite human.[56] To sum up, Michael Jackson is often described as animal-like, readily positioned in the realm of nonbeing (not human), and made into thingliness "in the order of things." Here is how Patrice Douglas and Fred Wilderson explain it: "Being black, or . . . black(ened) being . . . submits my being to the perpetuity of political ontological breaking with and by inescapable gravity and darkness, such that, on orders of time and space both macro and micro—being, life, existence, knowledge, ethics, as they are framed by the permanence promised by capital 'D' Death (social death) and the temporariness inherent in lower-case 'd' (corporeal death)."[57] By way of explanation, blacks arrive in this world already blackened.

Against the irrationality of blackness and its social positioning, a black person is always ahead of himself, not in the same way in which Simone de Beauvoir sees it, "as projecting [themself] toward something, toward the future,"[58] but in the sense that they are continually already marked, complete, certain[59] in their blackness, and it is rather difficult for them to function outside of race. This might lead us to recognize that, unlike the existentialist assertion according to which existence comes before essence, essence (race) precedes and, at the same time, sustains a black person's existence. In other words, race constitutes who the subject is in a way that frames whites' views of blacks. With Fanon, one can say again, "I come back to one fact, wherever he goes, the Negro remains a Negro."[60] Sealed in their blackness as a nonbeing (not human), they are something else.

In her work *On Michael Jackson*, Margo Jefferson borrows Keith Haring's words and states that "it would be much cooler if [Michael Jackson] would go all the way and get his ears pointed or add a tail or something, but give him time."[61] This is a rather disturbing comment, even more so if one takes into account her appreciation of Haring's comment as "refresh-

ingly nonjudgmental."[62] And even though some of us remained startled by such offensive statements, the internet shows an image of Michael Jackson dressed in a white satin tuxedo, flowing hair, and heavy makeup, accepting his trophy from the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame. Next to his picture is a still from the 2001 film, *Planet of the Apes*, showing one of the leading apes played by Helena Bonham Carter "in heavy ape-make-up and ape costume, dressed in a shimmering disco suit."[63] Depending on one's *ways of seeing*, according to Kathy Davis, "the resemblance between the images is unmistakable: their faces and poses are alike, their hair is similar, they are wearing the same kind of clothing."[64] As the proverbial saying goes, "seeing is believing"—that is, only distinct evidence is convincing. Fittingly, the uncritical thought is that visual perception engages the world in an objective way and is never answering to any subjective influences. It is the definite and tangible understanding of reality. While "seeing is believing" is simply "false seeing" because of the objective way of understanding the reality of race, I want to propose here that seeing Michael Jackson as a monkey is another form of "false seeing."[65] It is, in fact, a form of willful blindness with the purpose to denigrate. However, I don't think that many have yet caught up with the fact, as the zoologist Desmond John Morris reveals, that all human beings "share 84.4 [percent] of our genetic makeup with the chimpanzee."[66]

"Willfulness," Sara Ahmed explains, is "asserting or disposed to assert one's will against persuasion, instruction, or command; governed by will without regard to reason; determined to take one's own way obstinately self-willed or perverse."[67] As a way of moving away—far away—from willful blindness, there is a dire need for an alternative definition for "seeing," which is called "reseeing." Reseeing would involve not only retraining the eyes to see differently, which is outside of immediate sensory perceptions, but also moving away from "false seeing."[68] But first, we would have to unlearn what we have learned to "see" about the black body. It would require understanding that truth-claims of race as a marker promote differences that lead to racialized discourse and practices. The unlearning, then, would be, in the postcolonial theorist Gayatri C. Spivak's oeuvre, "one's loss"[69] so as to extricate one's dominant ways of seeing and knowing all there is to see and know about the black body, which returns it to its presumed animality. The form of psychic and ethical risk for the white subject would be a good example of what James Baldwin means when he suggests "to earn one's death."[70]

Another example of blacks depicted as "not to be" (nonhuman) is the posters of Barack Obama as a monkey, or as an African witch doctor

wearing tribal regalia.[71] In an anxious attempt to demonstrate their disgruntlement of having a black president and to "[take] the country back" and "[return] the American government to the American people,"[72] white right-wing ideologues and the Tea Party furthered the idea of the black man as a nonhuman. *Who are "the American people"?* is an insightful question posed by Bruno Bosteels. "How does a people become a people? Does a people become only that which it *is*? If so, then what *is* it? How can we know: (1) What a people in general *is*? (2) What this or that people is? (3) What we ourselves are?"[73] Besides these questions is another underlying one: What is it that defines "the American people?" Indeed, whiteness is essential for the construction of "the American people" as white. Although there was a cultural practice and a social code already in place that determined whites as American, with the Naturalization Act of 1790,[74] American citizenry is white because it is institutionalized. The Act, of course, allowed only whites to be citizens of the United States, forging a single American identity amongst its diverse multicultural and multiracial population. Indeed, whiteness is the standard against which blacks are measured and deemed as inferior by virtue of their blackness. There is no other vantage point for many whites to imagine otherwise because, as George Yancy reminds us, "to imagine otherwise is seriously truncated by ideological and material forces that are systematically linked to the history of white racism."[75]

Blackness, positioned as "outside" of what constitutes an American identity, is viewed as a threat to the social body. Any analysis of blackness needs to inquire into what renders this kind of a priori racial knowledge possible. Just as Judith Butler in *Gender Troubles* argues in opposition to a sex-gender differentiation in which sex is the natural, univocal, and material basis of gender, culturally created and performative, it should not surprise us, at this juncture, that the binary opposition of whites as civilized and blacks as uncivilized needs to be deconstructed and recognized as a culturally constructed hierarchy that puts blacks at the bottom and fixes them in a place of alterity whose boundaries are continually conferred by an arsenal of dehumanizing practices. In the end, for Michael Jackson, coming to terms with the existential dilemma of self-definition in a society where whiteness is the norm becomes problematic.

The outcome is always looking at oneself through the eyes of the culturally constituted white gaze, which is inescapable and forces upon blacks an unusual weight. Whiteness has been the definitive marker for acceptability within "The Great Chain of Being,"[76] providing the fundamental structure for the present formulation of race. It also provides, which is

definitely ignored, a consideration for how whiteness is fastened to itself as a "possessive investment"[77] in itself. This is precisely what makes whiteness unraced and unmarked, the invisible norm. In the United States, whiteness maintains its presumptive hegemony "through symbols, images, discursive structures, foundations, and epistemologies."[78] In the face of whiteness, the underlying dynamic at work, here, is that blackness "being what it is not and not being what it is,"[79] or, put differently, "a certain way of not being a being, which it posits simultaneously as other than itself,"[80] allows blacks to react to whiteness and, in some cases, to imitate whiteness. Blacks, imitating whiteness, in Homi Bhabha's words, "reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an *itself* that is behind" the imitation.[81]

It is not surprising blacks, in an attempt to resolve their blackness with what is perceived "to be" (human)—features that are basically assigned to whiteness—have propelled some blacks, as Kathy Davis points out, "to alter their noses and lips through cosmetic surgery."[82] In this sense, there is no "*blackness-for-itself*"; that is, a blackness that is conscious of its own consciousness, because "blackness" has not arrived as yet. Certainly, the black being is not yet known to the world, or as Fanon would say, "no one knows yet who [the black] is,"[83] and when it is revealed, *blackness-for-itself*, touching the "other," feeling the "other,"[84] would revolutionize the world and society would advance. Fanon takes this one step further: "Black consciousness [would] be immanent in its own eye. . . . My Negro consciousness does not hold itself out as a lack. It is. It is its own follower."[85] In Fanon's theory, blackness as the *same* will continue to be the case because whiteness is still the norm acting on blacks prior to any action they may undertake.

In all western societies, physical beauty standards are based on whiteness. Even though cosmetic surgery is treated by most plastic surgeons as a beauty concern (improving appearance),[86] it is in reality a form of race refashioning and can lead to pathological behavior, as the multiple plastic surgeries that Michael Jackson (and many) underwent attest.[87] Indeed, Michael Jackson's plastic surgery stirs up "bad news" for him because many view, for example, his "nose job" (to have more of a "white" nose) as trying to look "white" or, in Kobena Mercer words, " 'becoming white'—a deracializing sell-out, the morbid symptom of a psychologically mutilated black consciousness."[88] However, I want to point out that "to be," "to be like," or "to become" white would indeed involve a "whitening process." Michael Jackson would have to learn, in Harper

Lee's fitting phrase, "the ways of white people"[89]—the actions, practices, and outlooks that are characteristically allied with whiteness. This would not be a simple task.

For good reasons, the 1960s motto of the Black Power Movement, *Black Is Beautiful*, which contra the idea of black as ugly, emphasizing the need for blacks not to do away with African-identified features such as lips, nose, and hair by, for instance, straightening their hair, but keep it natural, "merely provide[d] a raw material for practices, procedures and ritual techniques of cultural writing and social inscription,"[90] which, for Mercer, itself is "cultivated."[91] The word cultivated comes from the medieval Latin word *cultivat*, meaning "till, prepare for crop," "to devote one's attention to," to looking "good," which is why Mercer can say, "nobody's hair is ever just natural but is always shaped or reshaped by social convention and symbolic intervention";[92] it is cultivated. Can acts of self-grooming/self-improvement "constitute 'political statement' or racially inflected acts of 'symbolic intervention' "? If is it true that in a culture where self-grooming/self-improvement is practically a moral imperative, is it evidently "natural" for anyone to want to be "cultivated," "to devote one's attention to" looking one's best? Is a black person having a nose job, for example, to make one's nose appear more "white," a form of self-improvement?

Certainly, Michael Jackson's nose job is viewed by some as him wanting to look "white," notwithstanding his confession in *Living with Michael Jackson* that the nose job he underwent was to help with his breathing and singing. However, we cannot disavow that "African features," through the European lens, are seen as ugly. While it is argued that Michael Jackson's plastic surgeries are about a sign of black, to borrow from Cynthia J. Fuchs, "self-hatred,"[93] and "an unnatural act that entails negating his essential [racial] identity,"[94] Greg Tate, for one, is correct: "There are other ways to read Michael Jackson."[95] In Michael Jackson's biography, he claims defiantly, "It's a matter of choice: I can afford it, I want it, so I'm going to have it."[96] In the end, his plastic surgery is, according to him, to "look better."[97] In fact, there is a moral argument for wanting to "look better;" to enhance one's physical appearance by, perhaps, having cosmetic surgery so as to look younger, to "look better." Certainly, to "look better" is always defined by the cultural ideals of what it means to "look better," and there is an unease and an apparent need to care for the body, a sense of its "vulnerability and exposure."[98] Given that the black body is always racially marked, or in Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey's words, " 'seen to

be damaged' such as black skin,"[99] what is imperative here is that Michael Jackson's body can never "look better." His "white" skin is, as the saying goes, "skin deep," and it becomes the site in which the desire for another identification (not black) and the impossibility of a "white" identity (not white) is present.[100] Michael Jackson's embodied blackness is always done in, overworked.

In the case of Michael Jackson, with the plastic surgeries he underwent, what he can hope for, at best, is pseudo-recognition; that is, a white mask. In fact, this is the trick of whiteness as structured in everyday life. As George Yancy has shown, "it is to give the appearance of fixity, where the look of the white subject interpellates the black subject as inferior, which in turn, bars the black subject from seeing him/herself without the internalization of the white gaze."[101] Hence, the black body has to police and regulate itself because it has internalized the white gaze, with "an inner compulsion and subjective conformation" to whiteness.[102] This is, in part, what W. E. B. Du Bois is getting at when he talks about "the double consciousness," this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of whites, shaping one's subjectivity as "mixed up" and fragmented, which, in particular, is one of dislocation from one "true" identity.

To this end, even though Michael Jackson's skin became "whiter"—"less ebony, more ivory," as Michael Awkward puts it[103]—the rumor was that he wanted to be "white" and not "black." Yet, in an interview with Robert E. Johnson of *Ebony*, Michael Jackson denies this.[104] As it is, as Atticus Finch reminds us in *To Kill A Mocking Bird*: "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point view . . . until you climb into his skin and walk around in it."[105] There is no denying that there is in fact a change in Michael Jackson's appearance as he has grown, in that "the glossy sheen of his complexion appears lighter in colour than before; the nose seems sharper, more aqualine,"[106] or what Terri Eagleton in *The Guardian* describes as an "over-chiseled nose."[107] Similarly, Kobena Mercer describes the nose as "less rounded and 'African,' "[108] and Kathy Davis concludes that it is "whistled to almost nothing."[109] In addition, Mercer complains that Michael Jackson's "lips seem thicker as less pronounced,"[110] which, as Davis sums up, "gives his face a skeletal look,"[111] past the point where there is no return. How Michael Jackson's body is read, narrated, produced, and remembered is fascinating. All of this—the politics of Michael Jackson's self-fashioning—is interpreted by his critics as undoing race, unfixing "race on the body."

Michael Jackson's body politics is provoking many anxieties about the "truth" of race on the body. The "search for truth," as Macarena Gómez-Barris and Herman Gray warn us, "is also what television, news, documentary, and reality programming depend on for their authority."[112] In the end, these mainstream media outlets, for the most part, support and uphold rather than unsettle and challenge dominant systems of representations. Not without worries, there is a pretense, at least, to impartial and objective news coverage.[113] In short, Michael Jackson's body, woven out of "thousand details, anecdote, and stories,"[114] is subject to all kinds of negative readings and conceptualizations. These negative readings of Michael Jackson's body demonstrate, in no uncertain terms, "how the body marks difference, as well as being marked by difference"[115] as it becomes a site for racial identity, which he unsuccessfully attempts to erase. To fully understand the "quandary" in which Michael Jackson's racial identity is articulated, a different ethic of reading Michael Jackson's racial performance is needed.

In the documentary *Living with Michael Jackson*, interviewer Martin Bashir seems obsessed with Michael Jackson's attempt to refix race on the body and the "truth" of race, "its veracity, its representability, its historicity."[116] In fact, the "truth" of race is pinned down to blackness "as overdetermined from the outside," the outsideness of blackness, which Franz Fanon describes as the visuality of the body—its surfaceness, in itself, a social phenomenon that has produced and upheld a convincingly negative understanding of race. Bashir, injecting "words like poison into the conversation"[117] with Michael Jackson, points mercilessly to Michael Jackson's physical appearance—light skin, thin lips, straight nose, and so on—which, he points out, is different from when Michael Jackson was a child. If Michael Jackson's "metamorphosis" suggests that he does not want to be "black" but "white," it is too simplistic to argue that he is unfixing "race on the body."[118] On many occasions, Michael Jackson announces that he would very much like to look like the African American diva Diana Ross.[119] And while this comment provoked some speculations as to whether Michael Jackson was contemplating a sex change, it did not dissolve in the least the highly heated debates about his racial "metamorphosis." This is not unusual. Charles Mills lets us know that America is structured in such a way that it is hard not "to bring race in,"[120] which Cornel West explains and describes as *Race Matters*. This is one reason why it is worrisome that some scholars suggest that this is

not about race and assume that "race" as a referent is "outside" of race thinking. These misleading approaches skirt the racial issue and obliterate the fact that race indeed mattered and continues to matter. Certainly, the interrogations around Michael Jackson's body allow for thinking about a black identity as "overdetermined from the outside." But the danger lies precisely in the problems that the outsideness of blackness poses for blacks. Michael Jackson's attempts to construct an identity on his own is subject to all kinds of ridicule directed at him.

If Michael Jackson wants to be "white," it not surprising. "However painful it may be for me to accept this conclusion, I am obliged to state it: For the black there is only one destiny. And it is white."[121] As Fanon explains, the enormous amount of privilege that comes with whiteness necessarily triggers an unconscious desire to be white or a phantasmal whitening through, for example, what Fanon calls "lactification" of the black race. Because there is no escaping the fact that race is epidermalized, how race is seen and treated in the visual realm—that is, the outward appearance in relation to the body and its physiological features—is paramount. The unfathomable site of Michael Jackson's body as a form of a radicalized difference from the essentialized concept of racial identity is indeed distressing for the masses because it is seen as "unnaturally" instigated. To make the point that there are different standards for blacks and whites who have undergone plastic surgeries, it is useful to think of the French body artist Orlan, who like Michael Jackson deconstructs "the notion of a natural body and fixed identities."[122] Of course, Orlan's radical act of changing her appearance through plastic surgery in the name of art is not harshly criticized. But Michael Jackson's surgical reconstructions definitely are. What these two examples show is that a white person is freer "to experiment with her or his appearance—and this includes indulging in the 'surgical fix'—[and] the same experiment takes on a different meaning when undergone by a black person."[123] And while we are all disciplined, in the Foucauldian sense, and abide to norms and values of whiteness until we become self-disciplined, we are socialized into thinking that "white features" are what define ideal beauty. This is symptomatic of the thriving market for skin-bleaching cream and hair-straightening cream in black communities, which reveals a "subjective enslavement to Eurocentric definitions of beauty,"[124] operating in concert with hegemonic cultural codes of whiteness[125] that fasten blacks to that corporeal decorum.

Any attempt is foreclosed by blacks "to throw off the burden of that corporeal[ity]."[126] That is to say, "the body as it feels," which "is experien-

tially distinct, if inextricable, from the body image and the discursive construction of the body that are culturally imposed, one way or another,"[127] on a black person who is being fixed by the white gaze. The body image, then, dislocates, relocates, and surpasses the corporeal schema. The corporeal schema is the way in which the body's agency is manifested in the historical world as a universal given of human perception, which is foundational for human presence and being-in-the-world with others.[128] The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty points out that both the self and the world are constructed through the corporeal schema. In other words, the corporeal schema is the image that we construct and reconstruct about ourselves as we move about in society.

The corporeal schema should be seen for its normativity,[129] which is based on whiteness and maleness. More so, within the experiential frame of the bodiliness of racism, a black person has difficulties in developing their corporeal schema—that is, the corporeal schema fails and the body is surrounded by an antagonism that comes with an "implicit knowledge" about the black body. This knowledge is discursively constructed within a racist society out of "thousands of anecdotes and stories" about a black person, which are ascribed to them by the white alienating discourse. One of the effects is an uncertain self-identification, a disavowal of the self. With extraordinary persistence, Fanon depicts this as a negating experience. And given that "the body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty," it responds to and imitates the pejorative white gaze and exceeds the "corporeal schema."[130] Hence, below the corporeal schema there is, on the one hand, the "historico-racial schema" and, on the other, the cultural and discursive "racial epidermal schema." Given that the "historico-racial schema" is what a black person must use in order "to construct a physiological self" for themself, "the historic-racial schema" is thrown into disarray. Consequently, the "historico-racial schema" has been supplanted with the "racial epidermal schema," which is culturally fashioned by racist discourse and "is the definitive structuring of self and of the world," creating a "dialectic between [the black body] and the world" that firmly fix the positionality of blacks.[131]

The very appearance of blackness in the face of whiteness is always already an antiblack phenomenon,[132] or, as Calvin Warren calls it, "onticide"; that is, "a certain murderous operation through ontology."[133] This is one reason why ontology does not allow us to comprehend the being of the black man. Not only must he be black, but he must be black in relation to whites, with no ontological resistance to whiteness,[134] thus reinforcing

his blackness. How the black body is acclimatized by race—that is, in its fixity–brings us to an important observation that a black person is, as Fanon puts it, "a slave not of the 'idea' others have of [him/her] but of his/her own appearance."[135] Once again, we are reminded of Michael Jackson's confession, "I look in my mirror and it took me by surprise. . . . I can't help it if I wanted"[136] "to be" (human). Indeed, nothing changes, because Michael Jackson's "inside" (the insideness of blackness) is the same as a black person's "inside," which cannot be separated from the "outside" (the ousideness of blackness). Achille Mbembe theorizes the suffering of the black body—its pain, its grief, and its outrage—in his disturbing "politics of vicerality" to show that the racist trauma is played out in the visceral. Indeed, the "inside" impacts the "outside."

Race as a visual presentation and a social phenomenon that has produced a persuasively negative understanding of race does take into consideration blacks who "pass" for whites. We do remember the landmark case *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Even though Plessy "passed" for white, he was asked to leave the carriage for whites and ride in the carriage for blacks. And even though passing is now passé and replaced by "honorary whiteness," race and its broader cultural dynamics entrap blacks in the realm of corporeality and position the black body as a foil to the social body. It stands outside of the norm of recognizablility (whiteness). In the case of Michael Jackson, the singer seemingly looks "white" but cannot "pass" for white. In this sense, "passing" means that Michael Jackson assumes a white identity in order to escape being black in a blackphobic society. If that is the case, Michael Jackson would then have to learn the ways, attitudes, and behaviors of "white folks." In other words, Michael Jackson would have to learn how, to borrow from Linda Martín Alcoff, "to experience [him]self as white";[137] that is, his relation to whiteness and the routinized and unconscious habit of always asserting his superiority over blacks, which is an expression of whiteness. Because whiteness is internalized and reproduced, blacks have no choice but to present an unrestrained predilection toward whiteness and to express their ambivalence toward their own blackness.

Whiteness, indeed, does not stand apart from the exterior inscription of whiteness upon the body. For this reason, a poor white person learns the attitudes and behaviors that are tied to whiteness as a fundamental defining signifier of white superiority. Surely, the principal task of white superiority is not a demonstration that, as Oliver C. Cox puts it, "white is superior to all human beings but to insist that white must

be supreme."[138] We do remember how white supremacist ideology unified erudite scholars in robes in the hall of academia and poor whites in the hood of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK).[139] The upshot is that to "pass" for something that you are not is to be tolerated by those for whom you are "passing." Tolerance, in this milieu, is that the tolerators (whites) have to put up with the passers (blacks).

The continuing chronicling of Michael Jackson's so-called white features is that "blackness" is always already anchored in his distinctive style and gestures, making him inauthentic. Accordingly, Michael Jackson is fraught by a "self" that is constituted, reconstituted, and deconstituted; it is a fragmented "self." Michael Jackson is, in the words of Henry Louis Gates Jr., "not only estranged from whites—he is also estranged from his own group and from himself."[140] Belonging to a group affords one with an identity and minimizes the weight of self-knowledge, of understanding who you are.[141] That said, Michael Jackson's skin becoming whiter cannot be imagined as him wanting to be "white." Skin, in this sense, is assumed to be the sign of Michael Jackson's interiority; that is, what it means for him to be "black" or "white." Even if Michael Jackson is viewed as "white" on the outside, because his blood is "black," it is a blood that never dries. Michael Jackson is, as DMX says it best, "the flesh of my flesh, the blood of my blood."[142] To put it differently, as Hélène Cixous's *The Third Body* does, "he is in my flesh, and he is in my eyes, and he is the marrow of my bone."[143] In a word, Michael Jackson can never be "white." To be white is "to be" like whites. However, his skin is also expected to reveal the truth of the "other" and to give us access to his being or, in this case, nonbeing (not to be). Michael Jackson's body is "pure text" to be studied and discussed. "To be" (being) or "not to be" (nonbeing) always remains "the question." In a blackphobic society, a black person is always "not to be" (nonbeing).

While bell hooks, rightfully, identified blacks' desire for lighter skin as a result of a "racist imagination" and "a colonized black mindset"[144] cannot be ignored,[145] today, passing is no longer about looking white; it is about getting a license for entry into "honorary whiteness." It requires freeing oneself from the labels associated with blackness and being presented to a white society in a way that make whites feel unsusceptible and less anxious. It is like joining a private club; once you have become a member you must abide by the rules. So, if Michael Jackson passes for "white," he will project an inauthentic whiteness, a whiteness that can never be outed and remains "in the closet," to borrow the title of one of

his songs.[146] Furthermore, we need to be reminded that he would have to adhere to a specific form of whiteness, which unremittingly accompanies the interior "whitening" process.

Looking white depends on the looker given that when the white *look* is directed at blacks, it always reduces blacks to the object of the *look* and blacks encounter the "other" through the *look*, producing an ontological condition for blacks that frames their way of being in society. In this sense, even if Michael Jackson looks "white," looking "white" disturbs the meaning of "looking black," and black is already a disturbing designation. That disturbance sometimes euphemizes some deeply antagonistic problem usually related to "looking black." So, if Michael Jackson is being *not black*, this disturbs the meaning usually assigned to being black (as nonbeing for whites), and if to be black is already a sign of disturbance, his identity as *not black*, *not white* doubly disturbs. However, this double disturbance might constitute an opening for "an-'other' " possible black identity. "An-'other' " possible identity can never feel good because it disturbs and unsettles the social body. It is a life livable in "social death."[147]

Notwithstanding all of Michael Jackson's success, he was confined to black entertainment. As a black entertainer, he performed at the Super Bowl in 1993; he was invited to the White House by both Presidents Ronald Reagan[148] and Bill Clinton. George Bush Sr. saw him as a role model, a good example for young blacks.[149] An invitee to the White House was and is expected to behave like an American. However, Michael Jackson was not expected to behave like an American but like a black American. Blacks as always "in expectation" to be black conjures up Fanon's eloquent summation: "When people like me, they tell me it is in spite of my color. When they dislike me, they point out that it is not because of my color. Either way I am locked into the infernal circle."[150]

It is not surprising that Michael Jackson finds himself in the company of the two most controversial African American leaders, the civil rights activist and reverend Al Sharpton and Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam.[151] The latter was name-checked on two of the hip-hop group Public Enemy's albums, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold us Back* and *Fear of a Black Planet*.[152] When Michael Jackson died in 2009, Al Sharpton gave the most heart-wrenching eulogy at his memorial service on July 7, 2009. Sharpton is remembered for his words to Michael Jackson's three children: "[There] wasn't nothing strange about your daddy. It was strange what your daddy had to deal with, but he dealt with it anyway. He dealt with it for us."[153]

As Greg Tate's " 'I'm White!' What's Wrong with Michael Jackson" notes, even if Michael Jackson is changing his physical appearance, his becoming "whiter," in the end—the outside transformation of skin/flesh from "black" to "white"—is not a good reason to put forward that Michael Jackson wants to be "white." In fact, Michael Jackson's skin becoming "whiter" has been explained as a skin disorder called vitiligo.[154] Vitiligo sufferers' psychosomatic recognitions may very well be invested in "skin."[155] Indeed, the recognition of "self" in skin color was historically made illegal with the implementation of the "one-drop rule." As that law stated, a person did not, need not "look black" "to be" black.[156] This might be something that many Americans may not want to revisit. But how the United States remembers its racist past is important since it has shaped its future on race and racial thinking. In this regard, America's racist history must not be disavowed because, as the great poet Maya Angelou reminds us, in the poem she read at Bill Clinton's 1993 inauguration, "On the Pulse of the Morning," "history, despite its wrenching pain cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage need not be lived again."[157]

What is even more paramount is that Michael Jackson's skin disorder, "which often leads [its sufferers] to [experience] social embarrassment and psychological turmoil,"[158] is stigmatized. Is it because Michael Jackson's skin color reminds us of the role skin color played and continues to play in the United States' racist history? Certainly, skin color is a social and corporeal attribute ascribed to blacks to position them both as distinct from whites and as less than whites. The "less than" is comprehended as a form of cultural lacking and establishes another way for whites to invent the social and existential realities of racial thinking, which works to powerfully construct and support a specific account of blackness that is premised on *likeness*—that is, a physicality that a black person shares with all blacks, fixing race on the body. *Likeness* becomes a matter of collective characteristics that take away from blacks their individualities because they are not perceived as unique individuals but rather as belonging to a homogeneous group. In this way, *likeness* unites blacks through a physical bond and, in the face of the white social body, makes them hypervisible and exposed; that is, "overdetermined from the outside." Michael Jackson's skin as the site in which the desire for race identification and the likelihood of another possible identity is played out disturbs and unsettles because it challenges *likeness*.[159] Reducing this racial struggle to Michael Jackson's desire to be white is distressingly unproductive. What this reduction signifies in the cultural unconscious is Michael

Jackson's desire to undo his blackness. But, in the racist society in which he lived, blackness can never be undone because there is no possibility of racial transcendence.

Michael Jackson, seemingly "transwhiteness," which might not be the most appropriate term to talk about his complex racial positioning, cannot be considered transformative. It cannot avoid the script of a particular morphological body given that blackness can never be successfully concealed behind an apparently white physicality. (Remember the case of Anatole Broyard and Alice B. Rhinelander.)[160] Based on this observation, Hank Stuever, a journalist for the *Washington Post*, says it best: "A black man is still a black man, underneath it all, no matter where life takes him even if that man is Michael Jackson."[161]

When Michael Jackson spoke in 2002 at Al Sharpton's National Network in Harlem, he confessed, "I just look in the mirror—I know that I am black."[162] Here, we can recognize the transmutability of the flesh. Michael Jackson's skin's surface does not merely delimit or contain the imaginary morphology of his individual self but actually enables access to the symbolic as a place from which both internal (repression, disavowal, and projection) and external (the gaze of the other) perceptions,[163] which permanently fixes him in the manner "in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye."[164] Michael Jackson's identity as the site of both internal and external perceptions is achieved, as Fanon explains, in "a slow composition of [him]self as a body in the middle of spatial and temporal world . . . , [which] creates a real dialectic between [his] body and the world."[165] At a quick glance, Michael Jackson's appearance, *not black*, *not white*, troubles the normalizing operations and surveillance techniques of a persuasive concept of race. And because he refuses these strict racial categorization (black or white), his body, no doubt, is a body that can be conceptualized as "the third body," in-between black and white, an other "other."

Many scholars have argued that Michael Jackson's body gestures, dances, and choreographic performances, when on stage, refuse racial belonging, which is applauded by those who refuse to recognize that in the United States race continues to give credence to the oldest and most persistent problem of race presentation as a bodily mark that congeals as the "other" or, in Simone de Beauvoir's words, "reduces [blacks] to pure facticity."[166] Going against all arguments that Michael Jackson forfeits his black identity, his performances on stage and in videos show that the ontological status of race is not far removed from how race is presented.

In fact, his "verisimilar self-presentation in videos such as *Black or White* draws directly from 'the rich black heritage that gave him his musical and dance style,' "[167] which is rooted in the Afro-American tradition of Soul.[168] Anyone who watches Michael Jackson's performances is moved by his style. Certainly, "the power of Soul as a cultural form," as Kobena Mercer points out, "lies in the passion of the singer's voice and vocal performance"[169] and is never lost in his performance.

Michael Jackson's vocal performance is characterized by "breathy gasps, squeaks, sensual sighs, and other wordless sounds,"[170] which, according to Mercer, "has become his stylistic signature. The way in which this style punctuates the emotional resonance and bodily sensuality of the music"[171] has a close similarity to what, in Roland Barthes's "new scheme of evaluation," is described as "the 'grain,' "[172] which "is the body in the voice as it sings."[173] In this sense, "the emotional and erotic expressiveness of the voice is complemented by the sensual grace and sheer excitement of Jackson's dancing style."[174] As a rejoinder, this, in Michael Jackson's words: "I try . . . to put in song. Put in dance."[175] As Mercer explains, it is a "cultural form and sexual ritual, a mode of decoding the sound and meaning articulated in the music,"[176] which, in Michael Jackson's words, "I put in my art to reach the world."[177] Michael Jackson's artistry is, as Hortense Spillers would say, "a site of irresistible sensuality,"[178] or, as Halifu Osumare's title reads, a site of *dancing in blackness*.

Indeed, Michael Jackson's style is rooted in black cultural forms, "the incarnation of complete fusion with world, an intuitive understanding of the earth," and "no white man," according to Fanon, "no matter how intelligent he may be," can ever truly understand (self-understanding) Michael Jackson's style.[179] If it is confession time, Michael Jackson would simply turn to the Presbyter/confessor, if he had one, and say, "Africa I have kept your memory [/] Africa you are inside me."[180] On the Oprah Winfrey show in 1993, he refers to himself as a "slave to the rhythm," words borrowed from Grace Jones's song "Slave to the Rhythm."[181] Jones, a black female performer, in her musical, dance, and other forms of aesthetic expressions, is considered a threat to the avant-garde "white, male, heterosexual music industry."[182] This is not surprising. In fact, in a press conference in Harlem in 2002, Michael Jackson accused the chairman Tommy Mottola and Sony music of "systemic racism against Black performers and song writers."[183]

Blackness is always perceived as a threat. The only threat, in my estimation, is a black woman fighting against how she is positioned; on

the one hand, as exotic and fetishized, and on the other hand, as fearful and repulsing. Race as a signifier is pegged to the other signifiers—gender, sexuality, and class, for example—creating her complex positioning. Either way, she cannot escape what Thelma Pinto describes as the Sarah Baartman syndrome derivative of the white male gaze.[184] In 1810 in London, Sarah Baartman, a black South African woman, was on exhibition for the white male gaze because of her "exotic" features.[185]

Even as a child, Michael Jackson's staging performances incited similarities with the godfather of soul James Brown, another great black singer Jackie Wilson nicknamed Mr. Excitement,[186] and Stevie Wonder. Above all, his "looping walk in African American style," to borrow from Gates,[187] which is "inside him" and gets out in his video and performances on stage, cannot be missed. One remembers Michael Jackson's performance of *Billie Jean*. In a word, his blackness can never be lost. What Maggie Nelson, in *The Argonauts*, says about "Wittgenstein's idea that the inexpressible is contained—inexpressibly!—in the expressed"[188] is another way of describing Michael Jackson's style. However, because Michael Jackson's body operates socio-discursively through an absence or a lack, "it cannot desire, but is, instead, desired."[189] In other words, being racially othered affects a black person at the level of his own subjectivity, which is always under erasure. However, the process of erasure always leaves its mark.[190]

Given that the "other," in this case, is always ascribed a racial identity, it is no wonder that Michael Jackson attempts to achieve the unachievable by reconstructing his racialized identity, *not black*, *not white*. It unsettles and plays on whites' fears and vulnerabilities by presenting an identity that is positioned outside the norms of recognizability, as between two races, black and white. What is important is that his racial identification goes against the presentation of race as a sign of its inherent "truth." In the United States, to be either black or white is prompted by obligatory norms.[191] Accordingly, Michael Jackson's racial in-betweenness, even though it might have opened up a possible way of thinking about race identity along new lines—because his racial in-betweenness still signals blackness—his otherness of the "other" unsettles the social body. It is in this way, the constraints imposed on Michael Jackson's attentiveness, "to be" (being) queer is "not to be" (nonbeing). Weirdness becomes the metonym for "queerness," another way of labeling what Michael Jackson himself calls his "strange eccentricities."[192]

Michael Jackson's Otherness of the "Other" and Its Problematics

The mistake is that we think we know something about Michael Jackson because of the many fictions he devises. Judging from his lived experience, he is nevertheless incapable of convincing himself that he is not white. He is unwilling to accept the harsh consequences of being black in a society that normalizes whiteness, so he tries to forge new meanings for the black body that unsettle its fixity and negative interpretations. In this regard, he vigorously attempts to move between racial spaces, *not black*, *not white*, and presents a sort of racial in-betweenness, an otherness of the "other." It is not surprising, then, that the persona of Michael Jackson has intrigued many scholars. According to Cynthia J. Fuchs, "whenever he appears in public—say on stage for 'Motown 25,' on television with Oprah Winfrey for their momentous interview, in Monte Carlo at the 1993 World Music Awards—his history is recounted through video imagery, reconfirming that his body is the site of a visibly identity, an effect of erasure, repetition, and resurrection."[193] It is indeed a body that is discursively constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed, culturally imposed and refuted, and undoubtedly bounded by blackness as culturally assigned.

Because the construction of blackness has ironically relied on an absolute contempt for the lived complexities of blacks in the United States that have always been reduced to otherness, Michael Jackson's identification process as "a variation, a deviation, and a spacing"[194] in relation to racial classification is far from simple. If his body always appears as a discernably changing identity, "an effect of erasure, repetition, and resurrection,"[195] it is a body in all its seemingly self-contradictory articulations that remains black, a static and inescapable reality. And while blackness is an infraction of a constructed otherness, it cannot resist being under surveillance. In other words, a black person is persistently, to use the title of one of Michael Jackson's songs, a "man in the mirror,"[196] haunted by a "self" that is persistently constituted and reconstituted by the tenacity of the white gaze, operating amid presumptions about race that do not see blacks as equal to whites.

Hence, it is important for whites to position themselves also as "different" from blacks. This form of differentiating, or what Calvin Warren calls "ontological cutting," demands remarkable epistemic violence,[197] which, as Fred Wilderson submits, is "a paradigm of ontology."[198] I have

given the name of systemic whiteness to this form of violence. For whiteness to remain invisible, it needs to produce the "other," blackness. In this sense, whites project what Diana Fuss identifies as an "alienation effect" onto blacks, who are "enjoined to identify and to disidentify simultaneously with whites, to assimilate but not to incorporate, to approximate but not to displace."[199] It is within the context that racial identification for Michael Jackson "carries an ontological and epistemological valence, such that the question, Who or What am I? becomes a question of being and knowing, a question of desire."[200] Another way of putting this is to ask who or what Michael Jackson is, which at the heart is the question of feelings, thinking, and knowing; in other words, of being black. The fixing of race on the body does have implications for racial transcendence proper.[201] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, in *Racial Formation in the United States*, explain this phenomenon as a racial project—a project that supports the systems and institutions advancing and upholding whiteness. In a world that is structured by such a negative imperative, in Jared Sexton's warning, "above all, don't be black"[202] becomes paramount.

Certainly, Michael Jackson's appearance of racial in-betweenness aligns with "the postmodern discourse that the body is changeable"[203] and thus must be seen for its rhizomatic potentiality. Furthermore, it deconstructs and challenges the notions of natural bodies and fixed identities as prearranged and controlled. Robert E. Johnson once described Michael Jackson "as beyond category."[204] Michael Jackson's disquieting racial ambiguity is consistent with his claim: "I wouldn't help it even if I could,"[205] which is not conceptualized, at least for him, "as an awkward or deliberate failure."[206] Certainly, Michael Jackson, for the most part, attempts to deal with his situation and the image he takes on. In fact, the image is not created by Michael Jackson but is the image that was already there waiting for him.[207] Yet, this image is sometimes enough to mark him as enigmatic and illusory. Terri Eagleton describes him as blurring "the distinction between facts and fiction."[208] In this view, there is no "real" or authentic Michael Jackson who can ever "become black." In the face of whiteness, blacks have no true role in their "becoming." His personhood is wiped out, canceled out as unreal. His attributes are deemed nonhuman. This cancellation comes in the form of a judgment which bears on Michael Jackson's sense of belonging to the "real."

While the black body is already formed, the plasticity of Michael Jackson's body—that is, how his body "takes form" and "gives form" in its self-definition/self-fashioning—makes Keith Haring conclude that

Michael Jackson is now "a trans-human, a cyborg."[209] If Donna Haraway is correct that a cyborg is "a hybrid creature, composed of organism and machine,"[210] why shouldn't there be bodies that do not principally take a human form, "a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation"?[211] Indeed, rumors were traveling that Michael Jackson slept in a hyperbaric sleeping chamber and that he was obsessed with the "Elephant Man."[212] Furthermore, Michael Jackson confesses in an interview with *Ebony* magazine that he continues to be called a scarecrow.[213] But Michael Jackson is not just a scarecrow because he played the scarecrow in *The Wiz*. Another way of reading this is that a black person in a blackphobic society is always transformed into thingliness, absolute nothingness. This nothingness, according to Sara Jane Cervenak and J. Cameron Carter, "bespeaks but the undercommon otherside paraontology, namely, a modality of life unmoored from ownership, (en)titlement, groundedness, and settlement."[214] It is in this condition that a black person can declare, as Frantz Fanon did, facing the white man, "All I wanted was to be a man among other men,"[215] which is also to say, in the words of Michael Jackson, "I can't help it if I wanted to"[216] "be a man." Indeed, Michael Jackson enters the world full of imagination and thought. Like all blacks in the United States, a world which "yield[s] him no true self-consciousness, but only let[s] him see himself through the revelation of the other world"[217] and bars him of any participation as fully human. His encounter with the other world, "the only honorable one,"[218] in the words of Michael Jackson: "I'm gonna make a chance/For once in my life/It's gonna feel real good/Gonna make a difference."[219]

And even though what constitutes a black identity is never fixed, Michael Jackson is considered a traitor to his race, as is expressed by several tabloids. Certainly, in Michael Jackson's quest to transcend racial boundaries, he is the precise embodiment of James Weldon Johnson's "ex-colored man," a liminal figure living on the margins of racial normalcy, neither black nor white, the embodiment of a fragmented self, fractured and dislocated repeatedly. In this regard, Michael Jackson's body is doubly registered and viewed as an error, which cannot be defended in the Nietzschean joyful sense of "restored reason." "To err is to stray," Sara Ahmed tells us; "to err is to go the wrong way,"[220] to stray from the usual path of normativity. Michael Jackson must be "normalized" and disciplined. The normalizing and disciplining of Michael Jackson will, in part, be the focus of chapter 4.